

Towards the advancement of the Mediterranean food cultures

Sandro Dernini*

Forum on Mediterranean Food Cultures, Via Giovanni da Castelobolognese 89, 00153 Rome, Italy

Abstract

The Forum on Mediterranean Food Cultures has the purpose to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue to acknowledge the underestimated role of the Mediterranean diet and of the Mediterranean food cultures for an effective sustainable development in the Mediterranean. It is addressed towards the achievement of food security and a broader nutritional well-being in the entire Mediterranean area. The Forum uses a creative approach for the development of community-based programmes to manage the emerging trend of childhood overweight and obesity, as well as to reduce the increasing erosion of the Mediterranean food cultural heritage.

Keywords
Mediterranean food cultures
Mediterranean diet
Nutritional well-being
Qualitative problem-solving
Intercultural dialogue
Sustainable development

The diversity and the variety of Mediterranean food cultures, and notably of the Mediterranean diet, are an outstanding underestimated sustainable development resource that has not yet been fully exploited within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. This Partnership was established in 1995 at the Inter-Ministerial Barcelona Conference that brought together 27 European and Mediterranean ministers of foreign affairs. It has laid the foundations of a mutual process, called *the Barcelona Process*, designed to build a multilateral framework for ongoing dialogue and cooperation between the EU and its Mediterranean partners, with the objective of achieving a common area of stability and prosperity in the Mediterranean region.

The Mediterranean diet^{1–3} should become a major player, within the further development of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership framework, towards the achievement of a broader nutritional well-being and in the challenging task of managing the rising phenomenon in Europe and in the Mediterranean of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents. Since its beginning in 2002, the Forum on Mediterranean Food Cultures, through its scientific committee, has fostered ongoing interdisciplinary networking dialogues to reach and to reinforce a common position on the Mediterranean diet, to be shared among all Mediterranean countries. The activities of the Forum started in Italy in 2002, with its first Forum 'Feeding minds — fighting hunger: Dialogues between the civilizations of the Mediterranean' held in Calabria, at the Food and Agricultural Research Centre of Calabria in Lametia Terme, with the technical cooperation of the FAO Food and Nutrition Division, the Italian National Commission of UNESCO, the Italian Society of Human Nutrition, the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Education and Research, the Italian Section of the International Commission on the Anthropology of Food,

and the Institute of Food, Science the University of Rome 'La Sapienza'. Representatives from 12 national commissions of UNESCO from Mediterranean countries participated at the Forum. It allowed the establishment of collaboration between different ministries, universities and cultural institutions from 17 Mediterranean countries. On that occasion, all participants endorsed the proposal to develop the initiative of the Forum as a permanent networking project aimed to enhance the diversity of Mediterranean food cultures and to strengthen household food security and local capacities in the Mediterranean region.

The second Euro-Mediterranean Forum, 'Dialogues between the civilizations of the Mediterranean on food security: The role of food culture for a sustainable rural development', was held in 2003 at Calabria, in Corigliano Calabro, on the occasion of the semester of the Italian Presidency of the European Council of Ministers.

The Forum has methodologically used the open structure of the interdisciplinary dialogue among all participants to overcome different cultural and scientific positions jointly to develop a new qualitative problem-solving community-based approach⁴ in order to reduce the increasing trend of overweight and obesity⁵. The Forum, through its networking activities, has the aim also to stimulate the development of joint technological innovations and community-based research projects with local agro-food producers to improve diversified utilisations of their local crops in different Mediterranean-type food productions, as well as to promote the advancement of their local training capacities. A common action is also necessary, through communication and educational initiatives, to educate and to orientate the consumer in the direction of diversified food consumption habits, following the Mediterranean diet model, and in this way to contain the rapid erosion of the Mediterranean food

*Corresponding author: Email s.dernini@tiscali.it

traditions that will increase dramatically in 2010 with the Euro-Mediterranean free-trade zone.

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